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INNER MIGRATIONS: IURII TRIFONOV'S LAST STORIES

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This paper was prepared during a research fellowship at the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in the spring of 1986.



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Iurii Trifonov's cycle of stories entitled *Oprokinutyi dom* appeared in *Novyi mir* in July 1981, shortly after the writer's death. It consists of six stories: five deal with the narrator's travels abroad, and the sixth is a reminiscence of childhood, also set outside Russia.\* The stories offer salient testimony to the concerns that preoccupied Trifonov toward the end of his life. Moreover, while they recall and in some ways echo themes that first appeared in Trifonov's prose two decades earlier, they are, by virtue of their complexity and artistry, testimony as well to the deepening and honing of Trifonov's skills.

The first of the stories, entitled "Koshki ili zaitsy?" (Cats or hares) is constructed out of contrasts and oppositions, a structural principle characteristic of the whole cycle. Nearly half of this quite short story consists of clauses and sentences alternating between "then" and "now." "Then I was 35, I ran, jumped, played tennis, smoked hungrily, was able to work all night, now I am 53, I don't run, don't jump, don't play tennis, don't smoke and can't work all night."<sup>1</sup> "Then," the authorial voice continues, he was with a crowd of tourists, "now" he's alone, "then" he had no money and went everywhere on foot, "now" he can afford taxis and books and can stay in a decent hotel near the Piazza Navone. Most important, "then" everything stunned him. "I wanted to notice everything, remember everything, I was tormented with the desire to write something lyrical about all this." No more. The author's voice of the present is, if not cynical, at least wearied and disillusioned: "*a teper' nichto ne oshelomliaet i ne slishkom khochetsia pisat'. Tut mnogo prichin. Ne stamu o nikh rasprostraniat'sia. Skazhu lish': zhizn'--postepennaia propazha oshelomitel'nogo.*" The contrast between "then"

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\*A seventh story belonging to the cycle appeared in *Znamia*, 11/86.

and "now" is carried throughout the story-cycle, each story juxtaposing a one-time Trifonov and a Trifonov of today, though the past and present contexts vary.

In "Koshki ili zaitsey," Trifonov recalls quite explicitly a trip he had made to a Rome suburb 18 years earlier, and the story he wrote about it, "Vospominanie o Dzhentsano." (The story, written in 1960, is included in his 1978 two-volume selected works.) In that story the author, speaking in the first person, describes his visit to Genzano, where he and the rest of a group of Soviet tourists are greeted by the communist mayor and a fireworks display in the village. Italians and Russians eat and drink and sing together, despite their lack of a common language. The story is predictable; it underscores the universality of human experience and human nature with rather glib irony. The narrator, who looks down on his fellow tourists for spending the busride through the Italian countryside arguing passionately about soccer instead of observing the landscape, is brought up short at the celebration in Genzano: when he asks someone what a table of locals are discussing so heatedly, he is told, "soccer." Similarly, the narrator muses about the remoteness of Genzano from the "real" world of hardship and war, and about how much separates the experiences of Genzano's residents from those of his compatriots. Moments later, an Italian is brought to his table to talk to him--an Italian who, it turns out, was taken prisoner by the Soviets during the war, was in a camp in Arkhangelsk, and who came home to find his father and brother dead, his mother ill and his wife gone off with someone else--hardly a sheltered or "unreal" set of experiences.

This fairly early story is less interesting for its pat treatment of the notion of the commonality of human experience than for Trifonov's interest in

the role and meaning of time and art. Trifonov describes, for example, the busride to Genzano on a highway from which is visible the Appian Way; the contemporary parallels and occasionally intersects the antique, the past extant in the form of ruins of buildings "long ago destroyed by time" as well as in the road, which still survives, just as the land survives. He refers briefly to his own past--in this context, a picture of the Appian Way that he drew as a child which somehow survives though his notebooks and diaries did not. The concept of layers of time, so integral a part of Trifonov's later prose, emerges from this story as a nascent concern.

In "Koshki ili zaitsey," this concept is articulated in the narrator's description of Rome, where centuries are all mixed together and one can live in a 19th-century house, descend an 18th-century staircase, exit onto a 15th-century street and drive off in a space-age automobile. Similarly, the self of 18 years earlier has not been eradicated, it still exists within the self that is now visiting Italy. The narrator retains and contains within himself--at least within his memory--that earlier incarnation.

The narrator understands intellectually that there can be no repetition of the past. Two of the people who were with him 18 years earlier have died, and two others "*ushli ot menia daleko*." Nevertheless, he is shocked when his escort tells him that the proprietor of the restaurant where he ate so long ago, was, two years earlier, accused of selling roasted cat instead of roasted hare. "*A kak zhe rasskaz, 'Vospominanie o Dzhentsano?' Znachit, nepravda?*" Reality has betrayed art. His first thought is to add this ending to the story. But: "*... Nel'zia pravit' to, chto ne podlezhit pravke, chto nedostupno prikosnoveniiu--to, chto techet skvoz' nas.*" (p. 59).

Is art more "real" than fact? Is the created esthetic whole of

"Vospominanie o Dzhentsano" "accessible to touch?" Is it invalidated by the information that proves the experience on which it was based to have been false? The narrator's conclusion is complex: the sensation of happiness he felt then was real, not false; he sensed no roasted cats. Had he known, at the time, he would have had an obligation to say so: "*Neschastnye zharenye koshki est' povsiudu, i pisatel' ne imeet prava delat' vid, chto ikh net, on obiazan ikh obnaruzhivat', kak by gluboko i khitro oni ni skryvalis'.*" (p. 60). In one sense these lines serve as a justification of those artists who, examining their worlds superficially--not knowing, as it were, about roasted cats--gloss over or ignore unpleasant realities; the demarcation between depiction and "*lakirovka*" blurs at times. Trifonov may have in mind his early work, especially *Studenty*. On the other hand, the happiness was real, and to deny its reality by revealing its meretricious underpinnings would be a distorting application of hindsight. Art and reality have realities of their own. They impinge, they parallel, they even intersect--much like the Appian Way and the modern highway--but they are discrete.

"Koshki ili zaittsy" poses a number of questions that Trifonov explores in the remaining five stories of the cycle. It is no accident that "Koshki ili zaittsy," the first story, is set outside of Rome, the eternal city, in a small village that the narrator calls "*vechnyi*" (eternal). Nor, incidentally, is it insignificant that Genzano's main products are wine and flowers--the latter, at least, a "luxury" like art.

The second story picks up and develops the notion of change and lack of change in its title, "*Vechnye temy*" (Eternal themes). The narrator begins by recalling a painful incident that occurred more than 20 years earlier. After a dry period when he was unable to write, the narrator produced several



stories, 30 pages in all, and brought them to an editor of a "well-known journal." The editor refused them, with the brusque comment, "*Vse kakie-to vechnye temy*" (Always some sort of eternal themes). For many years the two men had no contact with each other. Now, 22 years later, the narrator is in a Rome hotel--coincidentally, perhaps, called the Phoenix--and receives a message that the former editor would like to see him. Despite his wife's strong objections--she associates the editor with bad luck--he meets with him over dinner. The editor has become a sour, bitter man, an émigré because of his third wife, whose children and grandchildren live in Atlanta. He turns his bitterness on the narrator, simultaneously belittling his writing and apologizing for directing his spleen on him. Their evening is interrupted by an explosion down the street, purportedly of a neofascist cache of weapons--the first unpleasantness "foreseen" by the narrator's wife. The second occurs the next day on the train, which stops inexplicably in a tunnel: the lights go out, and a burning smell fills the car before it resumes its motion. The story concludes with the narrator musing on his home so far to the north, snow-covered, from which warmth escapes in a streak of white steam.

From Trifonov's reminiscences about Aleksandr Tvardovskii we know that the editor who rejected his stories was Boris Zaks, and the "prominent journal" for which he worked, *Novyi mir*. Far more openly than in his 1973 essay "Zapiski soseda" (Notes of a neighbor), the narrator expresses how painful that refusal was to him, coming as it did after he'd finally broken through his writing block. Now, decades later, he can be ironic about the absurdity of rejecting literature for being about "eternal themes"--as if any good literature were about anything else. At the time, he had no such defenses; he sat in the journal office, distraught, disbelieving yet unable to

leave.

But "Vechnye temy" is not about the narrator's erstwhile vulnerability, nor is it about the stupidity of that erstwhile editor of *Novyi mir*. It is a story threaded with irony: about the reversal in the positions of two men; about the importance of having a home, nationally as well as personally; about understanding one's fate only in retrospect; about farewells. The once-rebuffed writer is now in Italy by choice; he can and will go home again. The once-powerful editor is impotent. He resents having left his old father in Russia. He has lost two wives, and resents his current wife's love for her children, describing it as a "somehow unnatural love." Its "unnaturalness" seems to consist of putting the children above him. He resents the fact that his wife's former husband was largely responsible for his own professional set-backs, and that it is for the sake of this man's grandchild that he must leave Russia for the United States, which he perceives to be a wasteland. He is aging, and he is without occupation or purpose. When he needles the narrator he sounds a bit like Ivan Karamazov's shabby devil or Hans Castorp's Settembrini: "Do you still hope to astound the world? Do you think the world will stop in its tracks for reading your opus?" His face is described as being empty, like an old Italian square at twilight, and the narrator's pity for him coexists with a recognition that he hasn't changed entirely. The longer they speak, the more his face takes on its old expression of a "sad executioner."

"Vechnye temy" is, patently, about abandoning one's home, about emigration.\* In an early comment on *Oprokinutyi dom* Nataliia Gross, taking a

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\*The title of the whole cycle, which can be translated as "The Overturned House," suggests how centrally Trifonov was concerned with "home," which metonymically refers to "country" as well.

predominantly political approach to the stories, notes the prominence of the theme of emigration. She mentions, by way of comparison, Bondarev's *Vybor* (*Nash sovremennik*, 1980), as well as Kostikov's *Naslednik* (*Don*, 1979), but observes that current Soviet literature mainly skirts the issue of the new emigration of the 1970s. In Gross's view Trifonov sharply condemns emigration, which is why the stories were published, "for this element balances the criticism of Soviet society .... The writer adheres to the current literary policy in that he supports the ideas of patriotism and national unity--in other words, the might and monolithic nature of the Soviet totalitarian state."<sup>1</sup> Gross's approach tends to distort the stories' essence, but certainly she is right to stress the theme of emigration.

Ushered in softly in "Vechnye temy," the theme is developed in the third story, "Smert' v Sitsilii." Here the narrator describes his meeting with an elderly Italian woman, Signora Maddaloni, who turns out to be a Russian émigré who left during the Civil War. The narrator is in Sicily for a literary event, the awarding of the Mondello Prize for literature. Trifonov has some fun at the expense of himself and other writers, both for discussing with formulaic seriousness such grave matters as the death of the novel--"Roman budet zhit'!" he concludes laughingly--and for wanting to win this prize, knowing full well the insignificance of such prizes. He doesn't win; the winner is "a Czech from Paris," presumably Milan Kundera.

Natal'ia Ivanova, in her excellent book on Trifonov, notes that Trifonov's "foreign" stories are all intimately connected with Moscow and with the author: Trifonov, she says, domesticizes (*odomashnivaet*) the exotica and foreignness of the world.<sup>2</sup> In "Smert' v Sitsilii" he does so by two means. The first is simply to link locations in Sicily with those at home:

rank-smelling fish hanging in the square "*kak v gastronome u Sokola*," is followed by an almost Gogolian description of drunken carters carrying heavy boxes loaded with quivering tails, while "*khoziaiki s sumkami*" get in line. The second connection is revealed in the overlapping family histories of himself and Signora Maddaloni.

At first Trifonov knows only that Signora Maddaloni is a widow, a writer, and that while from a distance she moves like a young woman, up close she turns out to be elderly. He learns, however, that she lived in Rostov and Novocherkassk, that she left Russia in 1920, that her father was killed in 1918 and that her mother died of typhoid. Her wanderings took her from Russia to Constantinople, to Berlin and Paris, and, finally, after the war, to Sicily. Listening to her, the narrator is astounded by the coincidence that his own uncle was the military commandant of Novocherkassk during the Civil War, and he might, as Signora Maddaloni points out, have been in charge of her brother's case. Reverently, she shows him the few bits of paper that represent her Russian past--photos of her mother and of herself as a child, and official papers her mother needed in order to take out of the country a pendant with diamonds--the source, almost certainly, of Signora Maddaloni's own fascination with precious stones, which are the subjects of her novels. Signora Maddaloni's final comment is that the worst thing of all (*samoe strashnoe*) is to die in Sicily.

What does she mean by this remark? Clearly, she means at least that to die alone, away from one's homeland, one's roots, is painful. She also means that the history which so divided her family from the narrator's--the seemingly ineradicable line that separated pro- from anti-Bolsheviks during the Civil War--is now far less important than what they have in common--that

is, Russia and the Russian language. The latter point is emphasized by the inability of the other two people--the narrator's "guide" and Signora Maddaloni's servant--to understand the conversation; neither has a word to say during the last two pages of the story. The sense of dislocation expressed by the former editor in "Vechnye temy" is restated by the Signora, without his bitterness but with sadness; irony serves not--as in the earlier story--to contrast a reversal in position but rather to emphasize the implausibility of this meeting, the chance that brings together people who, with much in common, are most unlikely to meet and discover their commonality.

Once again Trifonov examines the discrepancy between things apparent and things real. The aging face of Signora Maddaloni disconcerts him; from her movements he expected a young woman. And her riches--fabulous, ineffable, according to the guide Mauro--mitigate not at all her loneliness, the impetus for her writing career. Finally there is the matter of the Mafia, which is, Trifonov says, what really interests him in Sicily but about which no one wants to talk. Mauro at first teasingly says that everyone is connected with the Mafia; then, more seriously, he compares it to the mountains of Sicily--unseen in the darkness but known nevertheless to be there, surrounding the city. It is Mauro who returns to the subject with a comment that closes the story. The day after their visit to the Maddaloni home, he informs the narrator that the Signora's husband was a Mafioso chieftain who disappeared eleven years earlier and who, it is suspected, lies buried under the asphalt of the street. *"No, vprochem, nikto tochno ne znaet."* Perhaps Trifonov's fascination with the Mafia derives partly from its invisible power, unseen but palpable, suggesting parallels between the Mafia, an extra-legal organization yet one with immense control over society, and the Soviet secret police in

various eras. The mystique that makes Mauro speak of the Mafia only in whispers, the suggestion of menace beneath the surface calm--like Signor Maddaloni's corpse beneath the pavement--all may account for Trifonov's interest.

The fourth and in some ways least satisfying story of the cycle is the title story, "Oprokinutyi dom." In it Trifonov contrasts two settings: the United States--where he spent two months in the mid-1970s--especially a trip to Las Vegas, and Russia in the 1950s, especially a dacha where he and some friends played cards. Natal'ia Ivanova rightly observes that the actual journeys of *Oprokinutyi dom* form a prologue, a starting point for a dialogue with fate. America--no more than Italy, France or Finland--is not a source of exotica for Trifonov, but serves to return the writer to himself. All the "foreign" sites of the stories form, as Ivanova says, an avenue for self-analysis, for the labor of self-consciousness. "*Vechnost'-istoriia--sovremennost'; takovy koordinaty rasskazov, deistvie kotorykh proiskhodit v Rime, Sitsilii ....*"<sup>3</sup> The real place of action is, she says, the life and fate of the narrator, who unites in himself all the people in the world he has met. Thus despite the narrator's peregrinations, the place is singular, and so too the time. This is most elaborately worked out in "Oprokinutyi dom."

Trifonov describes two groups of people, Americans and Russians. The Russians played cards together on the veranda of a dacha hung with strings of garlic and onions, its floor scattered with overripe tomatoes. Sergei Timofeevich, an "eternal komsomolets"--though a man then in his fifties--taught them a good deal about the past, especially the 1930s. Lieutenant Gusev, cautious and cowardly, avoided thinking and talking about death as

though it might thus be averted. And there were the narrator, of course, and his friend Boris, who had recently died. (Boris is based on the writer and translator Lev Ginzburg, a close friend of Trifonov.) Boris, the narrator says, would not be interested in a story about Las Vegas, thinking, though he'd never been to America, that he knew all about it.

The Americans are virtually all freaks. Trifonov, in one long sentence constructed of parallel clauses, describes things he's seen and people he's met in the States during his two-month visit: a rodeo in Kansas; a professor of Russian with the extraordinary name of Tamerlane Chingiskhanovich, who dresses in light blue and drives a light blue Cadillac; Misha, who lost 18 suitcases in Rome; stoned Indians on the sidewalks of Lawrence; white bread like cotton; the "biggest horse in the world" on view for 25 cents. He mentions all these, and more, in the context of his friend Boris' hypothetical lack of interest in them: "... *no on ni o chem ne khotel slushat', potomu chto vse znal i tak. On vse prekrasno znal bez Ameriki i bez menia. Tak emu kazalos'.*" (p. 70). While Trifonov is certainly implying Boris' wrongheadedness in thinking he knows it all beforehand, he has at the same time compiled a portrait of America and Americans that strikes this American reader, at least, as abnormal and off-putting. There is truth, certainly, in his characterization of the American worship of success and mistrust of failure and of "losers;" one of the narrator's companions in Las Vegas, Steve, tells him that Americans are not interested in reading about the kind of losers and "*neudachniki*" Russian writers seem to focus on. Las Vegas, with its one-armed bandits lining the airport and paper cups full of quarters, is surely as grotesque as Trifonov's description. But there is a crude quality to the relationship of Lola, a middle-aged woman; her younger lover Bob; and

her sick, hysterical daughter Suzy that is most unusual for Trifonov. And Ruth, the older woman who writes books about psychiatry and quotes poems about being the master of one's fate, is limned broadly, without nuance. Perhaps this, rather than what Gross calls "condemnation" of emigration, was a price Trifonov had to pay for official approval of the stories.

"Oprokinutyi dom" is a story about the suddenness of death, which strikes like a whirlwind, and about what Trifonov calls the thread connecting two "such dissimilar places," a thread consisting of "love, death, hopes, disappointments, despair and happiness as brief as a gust of wind." As he did in the other stories, Trifonov connects the two worlds he is depicting by links, both visible and invisible. The girls carrying coin-trays round their necks in the casino remind him of cigarette-vendors once upon a time on Tverskoi Boulevard; a deranged doctor whose last name is the same as Boris' replies, when asked if he has any relatives in Moscow, "*Vse v etom mire moi rodstvenniki.*"

It is also, as Natal'ia Ivanova suggests, a dialogue with fate. People, both in Russia and in the United States, think that they are masters of their fates, but they are not; they are only masters of their lives. Their fates happen to them, unexpectedly, unpredictably and before, or after, they are ready. Despite what Lola and the other Americans may think, fate is not submissive to will power. Despite the lieutenant's best efforts, death cannot be avoided by looking away or keeping silent. Lieutenant Gusev is not a "real" lieutenant--that is, a war-time lieutenant; he is likened to a "*lozhnyi openok*," a mushroom that looks like an innocuous, edible mushroom but is in fact poisonous.

Gambling, a prominent theme in Russian literature, is, of course, an



attempt to control fate. When the narrator played cards with his friends until dawn back in the 1950s, they were "*odurmanennye vozhdeleniem peremenit' sud'bu*," no less than Las Vegas's stupefied crowds feeding coins into the slot machines. The fate that led Signora Maddaloni to die in Sicily, the destiny that brought the former editor to the West and, ultimately, to die away from home, the fate that decreed Boris's early death--is not a malleable force amenable to human wish or will. For Trifonov, recognizing the limits of human abilities is as important as utilizing those abilities to their utmost within those limits--that is, becoming master of one's life, if not of one's fate and of one's death.

"Poseshchenie Marka Shagala" is a celebration of being precisely that, master of one's life for as long as one is alive. Trifonov describes, in the course of visiting Mark Chagall in southern France, his former father-in-law, Iona Aleksandrovich, who died two years earlier. These two artists were friends in their early years until fate put them in different countries. Chagall is, in a way, less important in the story than Iona Aleksandrovich; Chagall is present as the potential other side of the coin--the artist Iona Aleksandrovich might, in other circumstances, have become.

Iona Aleksandrovich was the father of the narrator's first wife, who died unexpectedly quite young. "*Letaiushchie liubovniki Shagala--eto my vse, kto plavaet v sinem nebe sud'by. Ia dogadalsia ob etom pozzhe.*" From Iona Aleksandrovich in the mid-1950s, the narrator learned the important lesson that truth in art is always "*chut' sdvinuto, chut' koso, chut' razorvano, chut' ne zakoncheno i ne nachato, togda pul'siruet volshebstvo zhizni.*" (p. 76). It is an approach that Trifonov consistently followed in his mature work, and that characterizes Chagall's paintings as well.

Iona Aleksandrovich's most prized possession is a lithograph Chagall once gave him, a self-portrait signed by the artist. In the early 1950s the lithograph disappeared, stolen by Afanasii Federovich Dymtsov, whose sole claim to prominence was that his ears closely resembled those of Stalin, or, as Trifonov put it with considerably more irony: *"ego ukho po risunku bylo tochnoi kopiei ukha velikogo cheloveka."* As a result of this fortuitous resemblance Afanasii, for the first time in his life, began to earn a lot of money and, alluding menacingly to powerful connections, hiked the tariff for his modeling services.

The description is funny, except that the fear Iona Aleksandrovich feels, which prevents him from reporting the theft to the police, is not in the least funny. *"Teper' zhe krichat' bylo nel'zia, zhalovat'sia riskovanno."* While Iona Aleksandrovich cannot entirely hide his past friendship with Chagall, he does his very best to keep it inconspicuous. He has already suffered for it, in the early 1930s, when *"vredonosnyi shagalizm"* (malevolent Chagallism) was attacked, and he was forced, as a token of his good faith, to destroy some of his own early works in which "Chagallism" was especially apparent. The effects of that fear still inhibit him.<sup>4</sup> Iona Aleksandrovich contemplates reporting the theft: "And what if I do report it to the militia, after all? For them Mark's name doesn't mean anything, does it? But they'll start to ask questions of witnesses, neighbors .... Mark's name'll get into it ...." Occasionally he is defiant in his despair: *"Da i vremena, slava bogu, ne te: piat'desiat pervyi--eto vam ne tridtsat' pervyi ...."* True, but the word "Chagallism" is still negative, Trifonov adds, signifying "something between shamanism and caballism." As a result, Iona Aleksandrovich, forced to confront the thief, is nearly in tears and offers in a whisper to swap a

Levitan or Korovin for the Chagall.

Soviet history being what it is, the demand for Afanasii's ears passes (*otpala nuzhda v ukhe*), and the lithograph turns up in its rightful place on Iona Aleksandrovich's wall. And now, about 20 years later, Trifonov is in Chagall's living room, eager to meet the artist but slightly nervous about bringing up Iona Aleksandrovich's name for fear that Chagall will not remember him and that a chunk of his own past will thus be rendered illusory.

Chagall is an old man of 93, but still has the bright eyes the narrator remembers from the self-portrait and is full of questions, starved--after several hours of work in his studio--for company and conversation. He chatters about Russian artists, about his daughter; he asks repeatedly if the woman with Trifonov is his wife, "*ili prosto tak*." From the text, in which Chagall's words pour out in an uninterrupted stream, one has the impression of someone acutely alive, not very interested in the past, feet planted squarely in his current life. In this he and Iona Aleksandrovich are much alike; Trifonov describes how the latter, in his last few years in the old-age home, became infatuated with a nurse nearly 70 years his junior and fought like hell to get what he wanted. Only his death intervened. He worked until his last day, as--it is clear--will Chagall, who ends the conversation hurriedly so he can get back to work.

Trifonov uses the story of these two artists not merely to juxtapose the fates of two men who are, in a sense, flip sides of the same coin, but also to explore the role of art, and particularly art in relation to time. When shown a reproduction of one of his early works Chagall comments, "*Kakim nado byt' neschastnym, chtoby eto napisat'*." The narrator mentally concurs, adding: "*Nado preodolet' pokosivsheesia vremia, kotoroe razmetывaet liudei: togo*

*ostavliaet v Vitebske, drugogo brosaet v Parizh, a kogo-to na Maslovku ..."*  
(where Iona Aleksandrovich lived). Art is the only means by which capricious time can, indeed, be overcome. Given Trifonov's general attitude toward memory and the weight he gives to the past, it is a little curious that the Chagall he describes unambivalently turns his back on his past, even looking at the print of his early work as if a stranger had done it, and asking about other artists--all of whom he had known--only whether he had managed to outlive them. Still, that past is present where it counts most, in Chagall's work, in the "artless cows, crooked-walled huts, one-eyed peasants in caps, green and pink dreamy Jews in an ultramarine sky ..." of his paintings. And in a sense the point made in "Koshki ili zaitsey" is here repeated, in that the work of art, once completed, has its own life and reality, the past factual reality of roasted cats notwithstanding. Perhaps the intensity with which Chagall lives in the present depends on his internalization and recreation, on canvas, of his past.

It is Trifonov's past--his childhood--that becomes the focus of his last story, "Seroe nebo, machty i ryzhaia loshad'" (Grey sky, masts and a chestnut horse). The title refers to one of his few memories of early childhood years spent in Finland. His father was, in the late 1920s, the Soviet trade representative there. In adulthood Trifonov has excavated from distant memory this image of sky, masts, and horse in the snow--a memory whose "objective" reality is confirmed by an elderly woman whom he meets on a trip to Finland and knew his father. Coming full circle from "Koshki ili zaitsey" where memory proved false--or, perhaps more accurately, where factual reality and remembered reality clashed--in this story memory and fact confirm each other. There was such a horse, the old lady remembers; its name was Cally, and it

belonged to a laundryman named Anderson.

At the same time "Seroe nebo" affirms--like "Koshki ili zaitsy"--that the past cannot be recaptured or, if you will, rewritten. This we see clearly when the narrator comes back to his family's dacha during the war and finds their skis missing. They are a symbol of the life that had existed and is now gone, the family that had existed and is now broken, the overturned house. When he does find one pair, in a neighbor's shed, he leaves it there. Taking it would be pointless, since the reality it signified for him no longer exists.

In "Seroe nebo" the thread connecting past and present, vital not only to Trifonov but to so many of his characters, comes to him as a gift, unexpected, and he thinks, *"ne nado zaborit'sia otyskivat' niti, iz kotorykh vse eto spleteno: pust' oni vosnikaiut vnezapno, kak ledianoi perron Lakhti ..."* But in fact he does seek out the threads, trying to dig out of his memory whatever he can of the father, of the family, which disappeared forever as a family in 1937. He recalls the June morning when his father vanished, freeing him to play with the Finnish knives that had been off-limits until then. He recalls the mixture of foreboding and giddy liberation felt by his 11-year-old self. In time the knives disappeared, like the Finnish sled and the school notebooks mentioned in the earlier story; like his father, his step-brother Andrei during the war, and his cousin Goga--son of his commissar uncle--whom he lost track of for many years. The objects are not talismans; they have no magic power to animate the past. The only force that can even partially achieve that kind of magic is memory and its corollary, art, both of which work with bits and pieces and both of which eschew emotionalism:

*Pamiat', kak khudozhnik, otbiraet podrobnosti. V pamiat' net tsel'nogo, slitnogo, zato ona vysekaet iskry: ona vidit*

*blestiashchee pod lunoi gorlyshko, butylki na plotine, kak chekhovskii Trigorin, kogda opisyval letniuiu noch'. Chuvstva davno ischezli smeteny vetrom, kak sor, zato, vykovannaia iz stali, sverkaet podrobnost': kachalis' v sadu na kacheliakh. (p. 85).*

Trifonov ends this story, and the cycle of stories, sitting on a train back to Moscow in the February frost. He thinks to himself that what is strange is how everything forms a circle: *"Vnachale byla loshad' potom vznikla opiat' sovershenno neozhidanno. A vse ostal'noe--v sereidine."*

Certainly this cycle of stories, *Oprokinutyi dom*, forms a circle. "Koshki ili zaitsy" is linked to "Seroe nebo" both by plot device--return to a location known briefly and partially--and the problematic relationship of art, fact, and memory. "In the middle" is what Ivanova calls Trifonov's "dialogue with fate." Fate assumes different shapes and different meanings in different contexts: in "Vechnye temy" it produces the role reversal of the writer and the editor; in "Smert' v Sitsilii" it leads to the wanderings of Signora Maddaloni, ending her days in Sicily. Fate wears an ironic face in Trifonov's stories, tossing Chagall to southern France and Iona Aleksandrovich to Maslovka; tossing Trifonov's father to Finland and then to death; tossing Trifonov to Lawrence, Las Vegas, southern France and Italy, before returning him to Moscow.

Is it indeed Trifonov who is being tossed? That is, is the first-person narrator of the story-cycle, whose autobiographical details conform in all particulars to those of Trifonov's life, identical with the author? Natal'ia Ivanova sees in these stories an unexpected use of the confessional form, a "vulnerable openness" (*nezashchishchennaia otkrytost'*) that disconcerts readers used to Trifonov's more typically distanced manner of narration. She cites a letter Pasternak wrote in 1928, in which he describes a "new" genre: *"chto-to srednee mezhdû stat'ei i khudozhestvennoi prozoi, o tom, kak v zhizni*

*zhizn' perekhodila v iskusstvo i pochemu--rod autobiograficheskoi fenomenologii ...*" Comparing the form to that used by Tolstoi in his "Confession," Herzen in *Past and Thoughts*, and Dostoevskii in *Diary of a Writer*, Ivanova interprets it as an attempt to create new contacts with reality. By means of it Trifonov--and other generally non-publicistic writers like Rasputin, Kazakov and Voznesenskii--turns away from pure esthetics for the sake of ethics, from belletristic narrative for the sake of an open monologue to the reader, for the sake of revealing one's position and one's world-view.<sup>5</sup>

Ivanova is right to see in this hybrid form a greater openness, and a more unmediated access to Trifonov's views than is allowed by the characteristically complex system of heroes and narrative voices of his "pure" fiction. It is not entirely a departure for Trifonov; he used a similar voice in the stories written in the mid-1960s, including his first Genzano story, albeit less skillfully and less effectively. The brevity of these stories may also have something to do with Trifonov's choice of form. The novellas and novels allow for the development of a complex structure of interrelationships and values from which Trifonov's own views can be inferred. Stories a few pages long, with an intricate layering of time and place, might not be able to support the addition of an extra narrative layer. It might also distract from the presentation of the themes. The "I" of *Oprokinutyi dom*--who is certainly very close to Trifonov--becomes one of the girders supporting the filigree of leitmotifs and themes. As Ivanova notes:

*"... neopredelennost' fabuly daet ne tol'ko prostor dlia assotsiativnogo pis'ma; za etoi vneshnoi assotsiativnost'iu proslezhivaetsia mysl' o nezhidannosti, o svobode samoi zhizni. Osmyslivaia svoju sobstvennuiu sud'bu i sud'by blizkikh liudei. Trifonov prikhodit k vneshnei besfabul'nosti, pod kotoroi skryvaetsia vnutrennaia stroinost'."*<sup>6</sup>

As a result of that "internal harmony," the six stories which comprise *Oprokinutyi dom* form a unified and coherent whole in which Trifonov continues to elaborate on themes of central importance in the body of his work.



## Notes

1. *Oprokinutyi dom* in *Novyi mir*, 7/81, p. 58. All translations are taken from this text and are mine; page numbers will follow subsequent quotations in parentheses.

1. Radio Liberty Research Paper 426/81, translation of Radio Svoboda 176/81, October 27, 1981.

2. Natal'ia Ivanova, *Proza Iurii Trifonova*, M: 1984; p. 288.

3. Ivanova, p. 285.

4. In recreating the era, Trifonov develops a syntactically typical sentence, eight or ten parallel clauses all beginning with the same word, in this "kogda:" when TV antennas didn't yet crown rooftops, when women wore coats with padded shoulders and men wore gabardine raincoats, etc. A telling clause is included: "*kogda impressionisty schitalis' podozritel'nyimi i dazhe vrazhdebnymi realizmu ...*" clearly suggesting the strictures governing art at the time.

5. Ivanova, pp. 280 ff.

6. Ivanova, p. 285.